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262 The New Year holiday, for the people of China the first fifteen days of the year, is the main period of leisure for the villagers. Food is prepared in advance, and even the women may rest from their cooking during the first days of the holiday. The town is decorated with nien-hua (New Year's pictures) and ch'un-lien (paired New Year's Day mottoes). Visiting friends and relatives, gambling, eating the best food of the year, wearing the best clothes, and indulging the children make this the most festive period in the year. For many families it is the only time in the year when they can afford to eat meat dishes. The special dishes of the season vary from province to province. In a northern province such as Shantung, chiao-tzu, meat dumplings, are particular favorites; as one moves south, rice-based delicacies such as nien-kao, "year cakes," figure more prominently in the New Year's feasts. Besides being a time of celebration, the New Year is also the time for settling accounts, and, for many farmers there will be little left for celebration when the creditors have been dealt with.

•221 The regular work of the agricultural year beings immediately after the New Year. In Shantung the farming cycle is governed by the need to conserve water and by the demands of the principal crops: wheat, millet, kaoliang. From the Yangtze valley south through the East China Region, the year is phased by the steps in wet rice cultivation. In early spring, the Shantung farmer begins his year-long effort to conserve moisture that has accumulated in the soil during authumn and winter rains. About half the fields are then in winter fallow awaiting the spring

221 planting; the rest are planted in winter wheat. Fertilizer from the household pit is spread on the fallow fields. The wheat is brought to maturity by careful hoeing and by hand irrigation using well water -- a back-breaking operation in which the farmer is helped by his whole family.

In April or May comes the time to plant his remaining fields in millet, kaoliang, or cotton; often he must irrigate to assure the germination of the seeds. It is then time to harvest the wheat, and once again the farmer calls on his whole family and often on his neighbors for harvesting, threshing, and winnowing, all done by hand with the greatest care to preserve every grain and the stalks and straw as well. Then the winter wheat land is planted in soybeans and corn. The farmer and his family may then slacken their pace, but not for long, for autumn brings the harvest of the summer crops, the fall plowing, and then the planting of winter wheat.

221 651 Autumn, too, is the traditional time for the tax collector to appear with his demands for taxes in money or in kind. And before the Communist abolition of tenancy, it was the time when the landlord was given a portion of his share of the crop.[3] If the weather had been favorable and the tax gatherer was not unduly rapacious, the farmer might retain enough grain to see his family through to the next harvest. If things had gone badly, a grim winter season lay ahead. Winter

3. For landlord-tenant relations in Anhwei, cf. Morton Fried The Fabric of Chinese Society, New York, 1953, pp. 186-200. The typical rent in 1947-48 was 40% of yield.

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was in any case the time for repairing farm implements, weaving thatch, repairing buildings, spinning and weaving rough cloth, and other household chores. With the approach of the New Year the farmer might look forward to some festivity, perhaps to slaughtering the family pig; if debts loomed large, the pig might have to be sold to help.[4]

The farmer's life in the Yangtze valley and below is similarly dominated by the need for the most intense toil throughout the year if his tiny plot of land is to support him and his family. Rice sets the rhythm and dominates the economy. Much of the rice culture of this area is on level plains, but in recent years the terraced fields have been pushed higher and higher up denuded mountains and hillsides. In the early spring, after the New Year, the farmer brings up his rice plants in nursery beds near the farmhouse. Then he prepares his fields by plowing and removing in some areas, his winter crop stubble. Fertilizer is carefully spread over the ground, and then the water is admitted; when the water reaches a certain depth the ground is carefully harrowed. The ground is now ready for the transplanting of the young rice from the nursery beds, and this back-breaking job, done while crouching in the water, completes the Spring work. Save for repeated cultivating and trampling of weeds, the farmer has an easier life during the ripening of the grain. As the grain ripens, the fields dry, and at last it is harvest time. The harvesting and threshing are again

4. J. L. Buck's study of 16,786 farms showed that 39 per cent of these were in debt in the period of 1929-32. Cited in Lang, Chinese Family and Society, New Haven 1946 p. 69.

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221 651 the work of all available hands and are done with primitive implements. The harvest in, the farmer must deal with the tax collector and then ready his fields for the winter crops; in some parts of the East China Region, this may be winter wheat and rape; in others, two rice crops are produced in a single agricultural year. The rice farmer like the wheat farmer in the north, uses the winter to work on tools, handicrafts, and repairs, and the women of his family may carry forward their raising of silkworms and the spinning and weaving of silk. In other areas tea is an important supplement to rice agriculture, [5] and fishing is a full or part-time activity of about a quarter of a million people in Chekiang and Fukien. [6]

527 769 The farm year, toilsome in north and south alike, is punctuated by other activities and festivals which relieve some of the monotony of the long seasons of work. The first of the annual festivals after the New Year is that of Ch'ing-ming which corresponds in time to the Western Easter. Also like the Western Easter, it was once a Spring fertility festival. On this occasion the ties of the living and dead members of the family and clan are celebrated. Families often take picnics to the family or clan graveyard, make food offerings to the dead, sweep the graveyards, and then enjoy their feast. All relatives make special efforts to join in this annual celebration of family solidarity, and the outing is a pleasant relief from winter and indoor work. [7]

5. On agricultural year-cycle, see excellent description in Gerald Winfield, China, The Land and the People, New York 1948, pp. 34-61.

6. Cf. Geo. B. Cressey, Land of the 500 Million, New York, 1955, p. 127.

7. Wolfram Eberhard, Chinese Festivals, New York, 1942, pp. 113-127.